

VZCZCXRO4850
PP RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHFL RUEHIHL RUEHKUK RUEHKW RUEHLA
RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHAK #0759/01 1481313
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 281313Z MAY 09
FM AMEMBASSY ANKARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9760
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE
RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//J-3/J-5//
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU//TCH//
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEUITH/TLO ANKARA TU
RUEHAK/TSR ANKARA TU
RUEHAK/USDAO ANKARA TU

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000759

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/28/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: MARDIN MASSACRE PUTS VILLAGE GUARDS IN
THE SPOTLIGHT (AGAIN)

Classified By: Adana Principal Officer Eric Green for reasons 1.4(b,d)

This is a Consulate Adana cable.

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As the Kurdish issue moves to the forefront of Turkey's domestic policy debate, what to do -- if anything -- with the village guards has reemerged as an important piece of the puzzle. Established in the mid-1980s as a local militia to aid the Turkish military in its operations against the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the village guards have been frequently criticized for their alleged involvement in criminal activities and human rights abuses, as well as reinforcing tribal social structures in the Kurdish Southeast. Village guard members' involvement in a May 5 incident in a Kurdish village, in which 44 civilians -- including women and children -- were killed, has cast a renewed spotlight on the institution. While members of the state bureaucracy and Turkish nationalists defend the institution as vital for security, Kurdish nationalists insist abolishing the guards is essential for bringing peace to the region. As the GOT contemplates its next steps on the Kurdish issue, the village guards will stand as a potent example of the perils of using "divide and conquer" tactics.
END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) The May 5 killing of 44 civilians -- including 16 women and 6 children -- during an engagement ceremony in the Kurdish village of Bilge (Zanqirt) in the southeastern province of Mardin over an alleged family dispute by masked gunman has brought the village guard system into the spotlight. The assailants were village guards and reportedly used weapons that were supplied by the government. In the wake of renewed calls for the village guards' abolishment, Deputy Prime Minister Cemil Cicek on May 8 told the press that "the village guard system may be reformed or fully abolished -- (but the incident should not put all village guards under suspicion." Pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) co-chairman Ahmet Turk claimed that "this violence would never have happened had the state not issued guns to them." On May 10, Interior Minister Besir Atalay walked back Cicek's comments, however, noting that the guards played an important security role and that aspects could be criticized, discussed, or overhauled, "but frankly, there is no work to abolish the system."

ORIGINS

13. (C) The current version of the "Temporary and Voluntary Village Guards" (Gecici ve Gonullu Koy Korucular) was set up by the Turkish government as a local militia in villages in southeastern Turkey to protect against attacks and reprisals of the terrorist-insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). They were essentially a reactivation of earlier local defense forces established in 1924 to repel raids by bandits in the lawless days that followed Turkey's War of Independence. These in turn had their roots in the Kurdish Hamidiye regiments established by the Ottoman government in the late 19th Century. The current village guard system was introduced in 22 provinces in the East and Southeast in 1985. A "voluntary village guard" system was added in 1993 in order to supplement the program.

14. (C) "Temporary" village guards receive salaries, weapons and health benefits from the state -- although these, like their equipment, are at a lower standard than those for the military or gendarmerie (Jandarma). Voluntary village guards receive weapons and limited benefits, but no salary. The village guards work under the supervision of the local Jandarma commander. Concrete numbers for the village guards are hard to come by. Although some press reports indicate that they numbered around 90,000 or more at the height of the PKK insurgency in the mid-1990s, in 2003 the Ministry of Interior reported to parliament that there were 58,571 temporary and 12,279 voluntary guards. According to information recently posted on a pro-PKK Kurdish website, the temporary village guard numbers break down by province as follows: Diyarbakir 5,187; Sirnak 6,756; Batman 2,887; Bingol 2,511; Bitlis 3,730; Mardin 3,323; Mus 1,860; Siirt 4,661; Van 7,320; Hakkari 7,614; Tunceli 368; Adiyaman 1,485;

ANKARA 00000759 002 OF 003

Agri 1,838; Ardahan 91, Elazig 2,083; Gaziantep 555; Igdir 362; Kilis 33; Kahramanmaras 2,236; Kars 558; Malatya 1,365; and Sanliurfa 934. The large numbers of guards in stable provinces such as Kahramanmaras and Adiyaman suggest in some areas the program is as much about patronage as it is security. The reported 500 Turkish lira (about USD 340) a month in salary represents significant money in the poverty stricken rural areas of Turkey's Southeast.

REINFORCING TRIBAL TIES

15. (C) Although the village guards have undoubtedly proved valuable to the Turkish military in its operations against the PKK because of their knowledge of the region and of the local language, critics have decried the fact that the institution has helped prop up the traditional feudal, tribal system in the Kurdish Southeast, particularly in provinces with large land owners. Ankara tried to discourage the local tribes from lending their support to the PKK by employing them as a local security force. The local chieftains received arms and salary for each guard that they enlisted, usually keeping a certain percentage of the salary of each guard for themselves. A scholar has noted that the tribal chieftains, crucial role in the negotiation process with state officials, as well as the distribution of benefits enormously strengthened their social, political, and economic influence. It also created a "secret" network that has linked civil bureaucrats, state security officials, and organized crime. The lone survivor of the infamous 1996 "Suslurluk incident" -- an automobile accident which revealed links between state officials, the police, and organized crime figures -- was then Sanliurfa parliamentary deputy Sedat Bucak, a senior member of the Bucak tribe, which has been a major guard recruiter.

16. (C) There are few restrictions to becoming a village guard other than age guidelines and background checks -- and tribal affiliation is a key element of those background checks. Because tribes exert political influence on the local branches of ruling parties and maintain good relations with the state bureaucracy, they can throw their weight behind their members in the recruitment process. Similarly,

individuals connected to tribes historically linked with the PKK are weeded out.

¶7. (C) In the early 1990s, the guards became intertwined with the GOT's controversial policy of village evacuations, which resulted in the forced migration of at least one million people. The government used offers to join the village guard system as a litmus test to determine which villages were "pro-state." Refusing to participate in the system was considered by the security forces as an indication of active or passive support for the PKK, and evacuation and destruction of the village usually resulted. The guards' role in the evacuations forever colors the views of many Kurds towards the institution. And because village guard families frequently moved in to occupy evacuated villages, poisonous grievances over property compounded the PKK-guard and inter-tribe rivalries.

¶8. (C) On 15 May, acting DTP Adana Provincial Chairman Ahmet Kilic told poloff that the village guards were the biggest obstacle to the return of internal migrants to their villages. He claimed that 90 percent (undoubtedly an exaggerated figure) of migrants wished to return to their villages. However, former villagers did not feel safe returning to their land. Kilic claimed that with the village guards "living and sleeping with a gun at their side," the state had fostered a culture of violence in the region. Kilic said that the village guard system needed to be abolished and the guards be given other employment.

¶9. (C) Some experts believe the village evacuations in the 1990s and the competition between the PKK and the state shifted the economic structure of the mainly rural Southeast away from independent farming and animal husbandry to reliance on government salaries from the village guard system. Some estimate that the program supports a half million people when extended family members are included. In a May 20 conversation with poloff, Dicle University Sociology Professor Mazhar Bagli agreed that the village guard system had upset economic and social balances in southeastern Turkey. However, given the economic impact, the government

ANKARA 00000759 003 OF 003

could not just abolish the system, he argued. Alternative employment, such as planting trees, needed to be found for the guards.

HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES

¶10. (SBU) The village guard system has long been criticized by human rights organizations. The international organization Human Rights Watch has called village guards "a corrupt and corrupting system." The guards' right to carry arms, inform officials about suspected separatist activities, and kill in the name of the state has made them a powerful force in the region. A recent report by the Turkish Human Rights Association (IHD) stated that between January 1992 and March 2009 village guards committed various human rights violations, including forced evacuation, burning villages, kidnapping, and rape. In the last seven years, village guards have killed 51 people and wounded 83, according to the IHD report. The local press reports that about 5000 village guards have been implicated in crimes in the past 18 years.

¶11. (C) On May 18 President of the Mardin chapter of the IHD, Erdal Uzun, and his fellow attorney Huseyin Cihangir told poloff that the recent Bilge murders stemmed directly from the village guard system. They noted that the system originated in the Ottoman Hamidiye regiments that were involved in the 1915 Armenian massacres (which he termed as a "genocide"). Uzun and Cihangir described the village guards as a "crime apparatus" and claimed that the guards in Bilge were involved in narcotics trafficking and were also illegally tapping the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which runs through the area. The system gave state-sanctioned "immunity" to village guards to conduct crimes, revenge killings, and to otherwise run their small fiefdoms as they saw fit. Neither attorney believed the Bilge incident was just a simple "honor killing" involving a feud over a bride.

It was too well organized and conducted, they said. Uzun asserted that if a witness had not escaped, the murders would have been blamed on the PKK. He also claimed that they had heard reports that one of the main perpetrators of the Bilge murders was having tea with the local Jendarma commander a half hour before the incident.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: Despite the problems with the village guards, the state bureaucracy and security forces appear to remain committed to the system as long as the PKK operates, and perhaps beyond. Mardin Deputy Governor Niyazi Ulugolge told poloff on May 18 that the village guards will remain as long as the security situation dictates. In addition, the village guard system plays a vital role in providing a fiscal subsidy to an economically deprived region. As the government contemplates measures such as reintegration or amnesty for former PKK members, the question of what to do with the village guards will become more acute. Unless there is a parallel process for disarming the village guards and establishing the rule of law in the rural Southeast, then the bloody guard-PKK rivalry will merely reappear in another form. "Divide and conquer" is an expedient way to maintain stability; but in this case it is likely to be a major obstacle to long-term peace.

Visit Ankara's Classified Web Site at
[http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turk ey](http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turk%20ey)

SILLIMAN